

Toward a More Moderate and Tolerant Islam

Weinberg Founders Conference 2018 Plenary Dinner

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His Excellency Mohammad Al-Issa is secretary-general of the Muslim World League.



In-Depth Reports

Read a transcript or watch video of His Excellency Sheikh Mohammad Al-Issa's remarks on his vision for the future of the Islamic world.

On May 3, Dr. Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, interviewed Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa, secretary-general of the Muslim World League, at the gala dinner of the Barbi Weinberg Founders Conference. The following are excerpts of their exchange, edited for grammar and clarity; to read the full transcript, download the PDF above.

On visiting the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

Al-Issa: We studied this painful event at a young age, and our study was objective and fair. We were looking at this issue from a documentary point of view that chronicles history. Since childhood, we had historical facts about this human tragedy that shook the human being and hit humanity with great shame. The truth is that this is a stain that continued among those who still deny this episode or underestimate it...I have

also seen many documents and films about this painful historical tragedy, which I consider to be unprecedented in human history. This painful human tragedy reminds us that when human beings are deprived of moral values, they become human monsters...We must tell the truth and talk about this subject, about this human tragedy, in the name of the Muslim World League...

Yesterday we visited the Holocaust Museum and were acquainted with more and more historical documents. I was also pleased that in this museum there is [a] special section that deals with the methods of extermination practiced by the Syrian regime against children in Syria, and I also received with interest a leaflet about ethnic cleansing in Myanmar. The truth is that these are images of human solidarity that we must appreciate.

On the suggestion that Jews killed during the Holocaust were somehow responsible for their own genocide

Al-Issa: We always deal with this human tragedy according to its criminal characterization. But if we underestimate this tragedy on any pretext that would deter us from condemning this calamity, in my opinion, it contributes to deviation from the historical context and distorts the criminal characterization of this crime against humanity...History continues to narrate these tragedies and learn lessons from them. But some people do not want history to write these lessons or to record these episodes.

On “moderate” versus “extremist” Islam

Al-Issa: Moderate Islam is the true Islam. It is the one that coexists with everyone; moderate Islam tolerates everyone, believes in difference, diversity, and pluralism as a norm and part of the nature of creation. Moderate Islam believes in the right of others to believe [in their faith] and cannot impose its beliefs, its convictions, or its ideas on others. Moderate Islam understands the differences and diversity in religions, sects, ideas, and cultures. Otherwise, all people on this earth would have had one thought, one religion, and one culture.

All Islamic texts respect everyone, respect diversity. In Islam, there is a Quranic text that says: “There is no compulsion in religion.” And another Quranic text that calls for tolerance and beneficence with all Muslims and non-Muslims. It is a clear one. We cannot find extremists who inquire about this text; they do not mention it or do not want it...

Islam has never taken a position of rejecting the existence of any religion at all, neither Christianity, nor Judaism, nor other religions. Rather, the Prophet Muhammad said that whoever killed the ally—the non-Muslim who is present among the Muslims—that person who kills him will not enter Paradise. Furthermore, the Prophet was sitting one day while a funeral of a Jew was taking place. The Prophet stood up when the funeral was passing by. He said this is a human soul that he respects and appreciates. These are not my words but from religious texts.

On whether targeting civilians can ever be justified under Islam—whether in Europe, America, Israel, or anywhere else

Al-Issa: A general rule is that Islam is against attacks on civilians; it criminalizes attacks on civilians anywhere in this world.

On recognizing Jerusalem as a holy city for all faiths—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism

Al-Issa: An Arab plan was submitted to solve the issue in all its aspects, for a fair, just, and comprehensive solution. We all look forward to this solution; it is absolutely necessary as it provides justice for all. When this solution takes place, we will go together to bless this peace there, and we look forward to seeing it happen soon. Everyone is looking forward to this peace. It will be a comprehensive one that gives all sides their rights in all fairness.

On condemning the chemical weapons attack by the Syrian regime in Duma

Al-Issa: There is no doubt that this episode is also a criminal one. In criminal doctrine or international criminal law, it is called a crime of genocide against humanity. These chemical weapons used against children are also considered a stain on humanity, and it is the duty of international justice to stand firmly against these crimes because they besmirch the international community.

On what the Muslim World League offers young Muslims today

Al-Issa: The League directs its message to Muslim youths and everyone, even to non-young people. Of course, it focuses on young people because they are the future. It also directs its message to young and non-young non-Muslims. Our message is global and focuses on working to clarify the truth of tolerance, coexistence, and love in Islam. The League’s discourse also confronts messages of extremism, whether they are from inside the Islamic community or outside it.

On accusations that the Muslim World League, which now advocates moderation, has a history of supporting extremism

Al-Issa: The Muslim World League is a confederation of global organizations of Islamic peoples. It also communicates with non-Muslims for the purpose of cooperation to achieve the commonalities we all aspire to, foremost among them the establishment of peace, human harmony, the spread of tolerance, and amity, understanding the Creator's way of difference, diversity, and pluralism. The Muslim World League is a strong association, with a great significance and weight in the Islamic world. When the League speaks, the Islamic world listens to it, for several reasons, first among them: It is the only global organization of Islamic peoples [that has been in existence] for 60 years, and because it speaks to the Islamic world from the Muslim Qiblah [the direction faced in prayer] which is the holy city of Mecca. When the League speaks, it is said that Mecca has spoken.

I would mention that when we spoke on Holocaust Remembrance Day, I received many letters of support from the leading scholars of the Muslim

world. The Muslim World League did not receive a single message denouncing it or criticizing it for sending the letter, because everyone knows that when the Muslim World League speaks, it speaks on the basis of a wealth of information and a wealth of conviction. It does not improvise its message or the opinions it provides.

On whether the U.S. government has a role in the fight against extremism

Al-Issa: America and other non-Muslim countries have a big role to play, especially for the United States. This role cannot be focused on the interpretation of religious texts, with America coming to say that the meaning of this religious text is such and such and the interpretation of Islam is such and such—this can only come from within Islam. But non-Muslim states, and specifically the United States, are also required to face the voices of extremism that breed hatred and support terror organizations that benefit from the voices of hatred.

On what he hopes his greatest professional accomplishment will be

Al-Issa: My goal is to remove hatred, remove psychological barriers, and make people live in peace. Each one of us gets informed, reads, and chooses what he is convinced of, and is responsible for his choice. But we must not fight and there should be no hatred. We should respect others; we should respect the dignity and freedoms of others. The logic of justice and truth must prevail. This is the biggest achievement anyone can hope for in this world.

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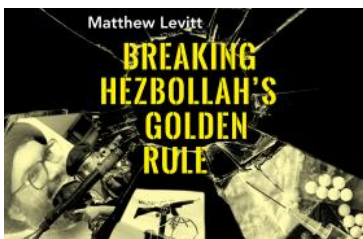
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